

LANGUAGE AS A POWER POSITIONING TOOL: NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA (NOUN) ENGLISH COURSE MATERIALS AS GENDERISED EXAMPLES

By

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ABSTRACT

Language is a means of identity formation, definition and construction. This study investigates the language of NOUN course materials for gender neutrality. The English course materials randomly selected across subject areas in the English programme are used as data source. The theoretical base of corpus linguistics within the frame work of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used to investigate the phenomenon of gender based choices of NOUN course writers to the end of determining their unconscious political stance in the gender politics. Frequency count of the occurrences of the gender pronouns 'he, she and they' are analysed in twenty-three course materials. Line graph and pie charts are constructed based on the collected data. It was found that the gender pronoun 'she' is subsumed to the gender pronoun 'he' in terms of frequency of usage. Even where it appears that attempts have been made to employ gender sensitivity through a wide usage of the gender neutral 'they', it is found that many of the writers that seem to do this are also those that used the male pronoun the most, thus leaving a state of identity indeterminateness in terms of power positioning. It is recommended that NOUN needs to enforce the actualisation of its policy statement on the issue in order to undermine the hegemonic tendencies through determined inclusiveness.

Keywords: NOUN Course Materials, Gender Politics, Corpus Linguistics, Power Positioning.

INTRODUCTION

The gender conflict has remained an issue for the simple fact that it refuses to go away from the social context. It is interesting to note that within the educational setting, the gender conflict has also found a place of its own expression. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is a foremost Open and Distance Learning university in Nigeria; in actual fact, it is the only uni-modal distance learning institution in Nigeria. It is thus considered a leader in terms of providing balanced educational experience for the Nigerian citizenry.

Daniel (2012) asserts that the place of NOUN in the provision of access to education to the Nigerian populace cannot be overemphasised. She thus notes that the National Universities Commission has given the mandate of educating the mass of Nigerians to NOUN. In the same vein, the Minister of Education, speaking during NOUN's second convocation ceremony on 19 January, 2013 at the National Theatre, Igando, Lagos, while representing the

Nigerian president, reiterates this position of government that NOUN is the hope of giving unfettered access to university education to many Nigerians.

All these make the kind of education being given by the University of utmost importance. It will thus be out of place with the mandate of the University to be lopsided in terms of its gender sympathy. It therefore appears sensible to investigate the linguistic medium through which the National Open University of Nigeria passes its instruction to its students. It is also important to find out if there is a political thrust to the kind of linguistic employments of the instructional materials of NOUN. It is also vital, in the light of the fact that the language of instruction in Nigeria being English, it should be the first focus of such an investigation. In addition, the language of these course materials being the national lingua franca, it is sensible to investigate this language as it is expected that it will likely be the language of focus and the linguistic director of the thinking and sociological positioning of many of the students produced

in NOUN.

As scholars have come to realise, the language of interlocutors is very important in expressing their psychological state (Halliday, 1971). Brown and Gilman (1972) have also been able to prove that language is a power positioning instrument in a society. Daniel (2008) also reveals that both sociological and psychological postures of women are actually expressed through their linguistic choices.

This study unravels the gender tendencies in NOUN course materials. It focuses especially on the English programmes' course materials essentially for two reasons. These are that it is a programme that is focused on training people to make use of the English language for communication and developing their critical faculty in looking at textual presentations. Secondly, it is the sensible thing to do considering that all the NOUN course materials are written in the English language. In addition, there is the need to establish if the instructional material training manual developed by NOUN for its writers is having the desired effect of making them gender sensitive in their presentations. If not, why? Nonetheless, this study is essentially focused on the reality on ground and not what might have been. This is what informed the need to get true empirical position to ascertain what is really happening with the language of the NOUN course materials.

Corpus linguistics is used for the analysis of the data. The questions to be answered in this study include: what is the percentage of usage of the male gender pronoun *he* in the NOUN English course materials compared to the usage of female gender *she*? Another issue to tackle is the level of the conscious usage of the generic *they* compared to the sexist pronouns in the NOUN English course materials.

Sexism in Language and Educational Access

Gender has been described as strictly a cultural construct. Tahir (2004) contends that "gender is a social construct that establishes and differentiates status and roles between men and women, particularly in the way they contribute to, participate in and are rewarded by the economy and the prevailing social system." Thus he sets the tone for the argument that there is a difference between gender and sex. Gender is obviously a sociological construct while sex is

actually a biological state of being. Nonetheless, gender as used here is really related to sex as defined above. It is a linguistic construction of the sexual division of the human race. The paper therefore links sexism with language as well as educational access.

Sexism is a situation in which the rights and roles in a society are dictated by the sex of individuals. It is generally viewed as being male-driven and accompanied by the supposed inferiority of women. It has been argued that women are historically allowed only limited roles as mothers and wives in the Western world (Reah, 1998; Schultheiss, 2005). This is regarded as the beginning of sexism.

The place of language in the sexist structure is conspicuous. Scholars have criticised the way language is used to perpetrate the sexist ideals through ideological conditioning. The discipline of social psychology gives an important insight into the way language helps to perpetrate sexism. Linguists continue to make immense contributions into unravelling the sexist tendencies in discourses. For instance, while Lakoff (1973), Okolo (1998) and Spender (1985) opine that the English language possesses a continuing tendency to put women down, Yusuf (2006) stresses that the language actually derogates women.

In Spender's (1985) view, the existence of sexism in the English language is well demonstrated. Both the syntax and semantics of the English language are male-biased; avowing that, historically, the term for sex indeterminate references was *they*. However, due to the view of some male philosophers and grammarians that the man is 'naturally' placed before the woman, they prescribed the generic term *he* as being more appropriate and grammatically correct. The author regards this as serving the dominant group's interest; it makes "the males visible" (p. 149). To ensure compliance of the public with this prescription, these male grammarians secured an Act of Parliament in 1850, which made *he* a generic term, inclusive of *she*. Therefore, "the introduction and legitimisation of *he/man* was the result of deliberate policy" (p. 150), intended to encourage the ascendancy of the male as a group.

On her part, Daniel (2000) observes that, in the English language, the male precedes the female in the syntactic

ordering of gender pronouns when they co-occur. This is found to be so in the arrangements of the pronouns at subjective (*he/she*), accusative (*him/her*), reflexive (*himself/herself*) and possessive (*his/hers*) levels. Also it is noted that, no matter the level of a woman's achievement, recognition of her married status supersedes any such attainment as found in such uses as *Prof. (Mrs.)*, *Dr. (Mrs.)*, and *Chief (Mrs.)*. The preponderance of such forms may be explainable only within the concept of social psychology in terms of deep-seated prejudice and stereotypes (Gaskell, 2001; Leyens & Codol, 1988).

It is thus important to establish if there is truly sexist tendency in the NOUN course materials and if this is actually an indication of the political thrust or leaning of the University community. Evidently, only empirical data can help to determine this. Bukhsh's (2013) study asserts that the ODL system has given women educational advantage in terms of access in Pakistan. But the worry with this kind of finding is that, as it relates to Instructional materials production, Are the women given the kind of education that will enable them to be self-assertive or just having a degree for the sake of it?. In this wise, though, one will have to agree with Gurses & Adar (2013) that having to go for a second degree in any society by a woman (not only the Turkish society) is a sign of having attained a level of self-determinism, they actually describe it as breaking the glass ceiling syndrome. This is essentially why it is important to determine if such advancement of educational access that ODL gives to students actually fulfils the obligation of getting women empowered or does it instead reinforce the gender stereotyping. Taskaya's (2013) suggestion is that women should be given content that builds their self-confidence which thus becomes relevant at this point. This study therefore seeks to ascertain if NOUN course materials actually build women's self-confidence in terms of linguistic choices of its writers.

Corpus Linguistics and Linguistic Analysis

Olateju (2010) defines corpus linguistics under different definitions. Quoting different authors, the corpus linguistics has to do with about eight diverse kinds of linguistic analysis. Olateju identifies specialised, monitor, diachronic, pedagogical, comparable, etc kinds of corpora. McEnery

& Wilson (2001) see corpus linguistics essentially as an attempt to scientifically determine a pattern in a linguistic text – verbal or graphical. Corpus is thus about a pattern of occurrence of a linguistic item in a linguistic text.

Essentially, Huston (2002) and Olateju (2010) state that corpora linguistics is to provide empirical data to support the investigation of the linguistic researcher. The analysis could thus be about ascertaining the frequency of the occurrence of a particular linguistic item or the means of ascertaining the pattern of the occurrence of a particular linguistic structure. The focus of this study is mainly to account for the frequency of occurrence of the gender pronouns in the NOUN course materials. This analytical tool is considered relevant here because it is an adaptable means of establishing the frequency of occurrence of the gender pronouns in the course materials being studied. It also appears that the corpora should help to give an overview of the preponderant pronoun or gender item of choice by the NOUN course writers. The logic is this, if the consciousness of gender sensitivity is lost to the specialists in language studies, one can only imagine the way the female gender is being totally subsumed in the other fields of study in the University.

McEnery & Wilson (2001) aver that corpus linguistics and computer seem like siamese twins. They add that the one thing that machine corpus studies have made possible is the ability to study large data – as much as in the realm of millions, which was not the case at the beginning of corpus studies. Wikipedia actually claims that corpus linguistic studies just present data but provide no explanation for their pattern of occurrences. This study moves beyond this level. This is why it combines the corpus linguistic instrument of data extraction with the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its explanatory tool for the pattern identified in the study.

Critical Discourse Analysis easily interrogates issues relating to power positioning within the social milieu as Van Dijk has variously shown in his works (Van Dijk, 1993, 1995). In the same vein, Daniel (2008) is able to expose the hegemonic complicity of Nigerian women through querying psychological and contextual bases for the linguistic choices of women in their print media locations. It thus

appears sensible that a combination of the two theoretical links should serve our purpose well in this study.

Data Collection

The data was collected from NOUN course materials in the English programmes of the National Open University of Nigeria. The course materials used as data source were randomly and purposively selected. In the first place, the course materials used are those of the English Bachelors and Masters programmes. Secondly, the course materials were selected across board. Randomly, courses were selected from each class, not based on any particular criteria except that they are those that are in the Word document format. This format was used because it was found that it is the most amenable to the data extraction method used in collecting the data.

The data sourced from these course materials were essentially collected through the use of the find command in the Microsoft Word 2007. The basic gender elements sought in the data are *he*, *she* and *they*. These three were selected mainly because the first two are gender pronouns representing the male and female gender. The third element in the search has to do with the generic and non-genderised *they*, which appears to have become the recommendation of the scholars that seek for gender neutrality in linguistic employments in the modern times (Yusuf and Olateju, 2005). Moreover, as argued by Spender (1985), this was the chosen mode of gender neutrality afore times before sexism took deep root within the English language. The intention here is thus to see if these writers have begun to comply with the modern and more gender neutral writing system, especially considering that one of the expectation of the NOUN training manual is supposed to be the writers gender neutrality.

Data Analysis and Discussion of Result

The corpus of *he* and *she* as well as *they* is analysed. This is extracted from the documents of interest through the use of control find in the Microsoft Word. The data is then analysed, using the Microsoft Excel programme. Table 1 gives a summary of the data profile.

This table is presented more graphically to show the frequency of the occurrences of each linguistic item.

S/N	Courses	Male he	Female she	Gender Neutral they	Gender of Writer
1	ENG113	211	41	238	Female
2	ENG181	165	108	85	Female
3	ENG226	40	23	142	Male
4	ENG241	24	0	66	Male/Female
5	ENG311	31	0	51	Male
6	ENG312	404	101	124	Female
7	ENG314	35	14	184	Male
8	ENG316	84	0	130	Male
9	ENG321	87	19	178	Male
10	ENG331	17	0	36	Male
11	ENG341	95	0	85	Male
12	ENG351	108	29	146	Female
13	ENG352	1	0	174	Male
14	ENG353	93	3	126	Male
15	ENG355	79	17	186	Male
16	ENG362	599	95	202	Male
17	ENG411	53	18	338	Female
18	ENG414	135	23	163	Male
19	ENG421	36	0	64	Male
20	ENG434	52	10	77	Male
21	ENG454	11	3	45	Female
22	ENG812	203	16	164	Female/Male
23	ENG852	54	14	123	Male

Table 1. Frequency of the Occurrence of the Gender Types in the NOUN Course Materials

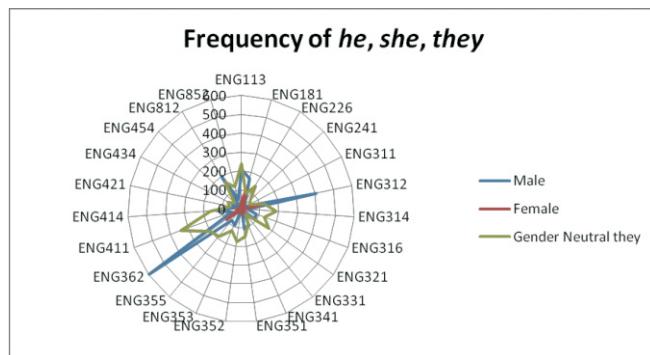


Figure 1. The Radar Graph of Gender Frequency of *he*, *she*, *they*

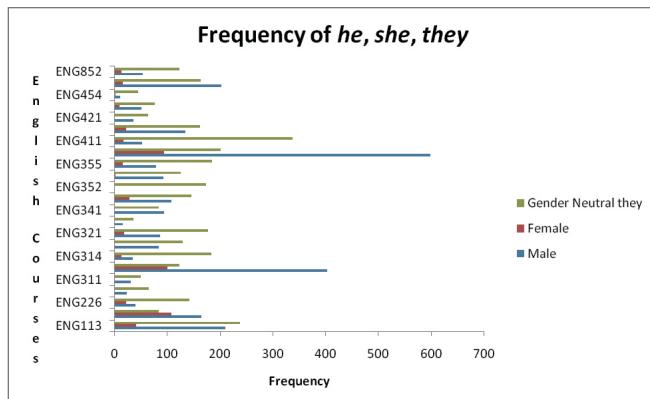


Figure 2. The Bar Chart Showing the Frequency of *he*, *she*, *they*

From Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2, it appears that the greatest frequency of the gender pronominal is the male gender. This agrees with Daniel (2000) and Spender (1985) assertion that men are preferred above women within the structure of the English language. It thus appears that the writers of the English programme course materials in NOUN view female gender as less than male. It is therefore a

continuation of the status quo of the female being viewed as less than male. It is obvious that, as claimed by Daniel (2008), not as much progress as is assumed has actually been made in terms of gender integration within the Nigerian society. Despite the view that the current political dispensation in Nigeria in which so many women appear to have been appointed into several political offices, even that of the Chief Justice of the Federation, has been so favourable to women, it seems that it is not Uhuru yet. The most touching part of it is that after the male writer that has the highest occurrence of 599 of the male gender *he* in the course material, the next highest occurrence of the male gender is in that written by a female course writer. It is thus clear that, as Daniel (2008) notes, the problem of the marginalisation of women is actually not limited to social exclusionism but also practised by uninformed or uninterested or psychologically captured female actors in the social setting. The writer of ENG312 is a female and appears to think it proper to subsume the female folks in terms of her gender linguistic choices.

A look at the pie charts (Figures 4 and 5) of each of these items should be able to reveal those writers that seem to choose to subsume the female gender in comparison to the others.

Figure 4 clearly reveals that the course that has the highest (23%) number of the male gender occurrence is ENG362; this is followed by ENG312 (15%). ENG331 and ENG421 share the least occurrence of 1% frequency. Interestingly, ENG454 written by a woman have 0% of value of 11 occurrences of the male gender. It appears that this being

Comparison of *he*, *she*, *they*

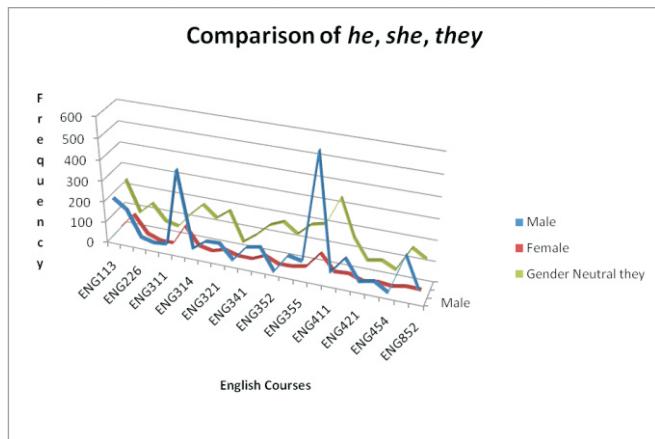


Figure 3. The Comparative Chart of the Gender Pronouns Frequency Occurrence in NOUN Course Materials

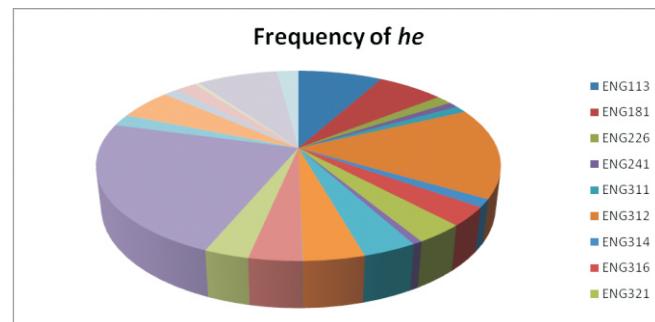


Figure 4. The Pie Chart Showing the Frequency of the Occurrence of *he*

written by a female could account for this. Nonetheless, it is also obvious that some of these course materials writers have had their consciousness drawn to this sexist tendency in their writing. It seems that those other writers whose sexist linguistic occurrences are very high would need to be made aware of this tendency in their work in order to reduce such politically negative stance that is anti-women.

The largest percentage in this pie chart is 20%, which belongs to point 1, which is ENG181. ENG312 follows with 19%. ENG362 has 18%. ENG113 has 8%. Now what is interesting about this analysis is not only that these two have the highest occurrence of male gender but also that ENG353 and ENG454 that have such low level of male gender pronominal occurrences are also the ones with low female gender frequency. Interestingly, also ENG362 and ENG312 that have the highest number of male gender occurrence also have the highest number of female gender. Nonetheless, it is obvious that the male gender in the two cases have higher level of occurrence than the female. This is clearly shown in Figure 3. The question one needs to ascertain is how to determine what is really

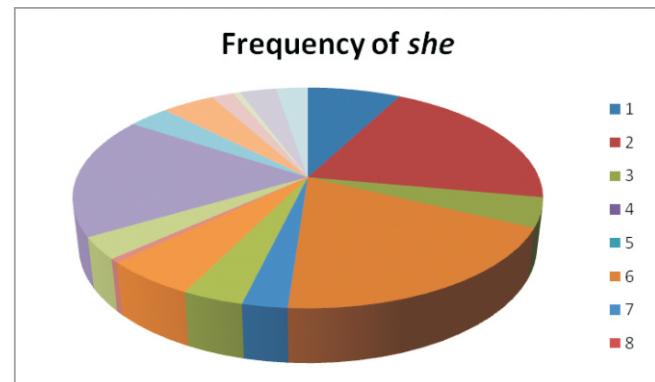


Figure 5. The Pie Chart Showing the Frequency of Occurrence of *she*

responsible for this seeming contradiction.

This line graph in Figure 6 presents a comparison of the occurrence of male and female gender pronouns used in the course materials. The graph clearly shows that the male gender totally dominates the female gender in the data analysed. This clearly shows that the female gender is subsumed in the political leaning of the course materials written for NOUN. The issue is that: is this the position of NOUN? This is further discussed.

Interesting also is that about four of the course materials do not even have any female pronoun as shown by the 0 value of the occurrence of *she* in Table 1. This is found to be the case in ENG331, ENG316, ENG352 and ENG421. All of these course materials are written by the male folk. Can NOUN wash its hand clean of the clear politically negative posturing against women by these writers? One cannot assume this to be so. The University does need to do something tangible about this state of affairs.

Figure 7 is as self-explanatory just like the other figures in this paper. Here the material with the highest occurrence of the generic *they* is ENG411. This is followed by ENG113, which is 8%. These two course materials are written by women. It thus appears that gender has something to do with the usage of the gender neutral term in these particular cases. Serial numbers 7 (ENG314), 9 (ENG321), 13 (ENG352), 15 (ENG355), and 16 (ENG362) on Table 1 tie at 6%. ENG352, even though a male, appears to place more premium on the use of the gender neutral *they*. Whether this is accidental is a matter for debate, which can be tackled later. This is because the only time this writer uses a gender

Frequency of Gender Neutral *they*

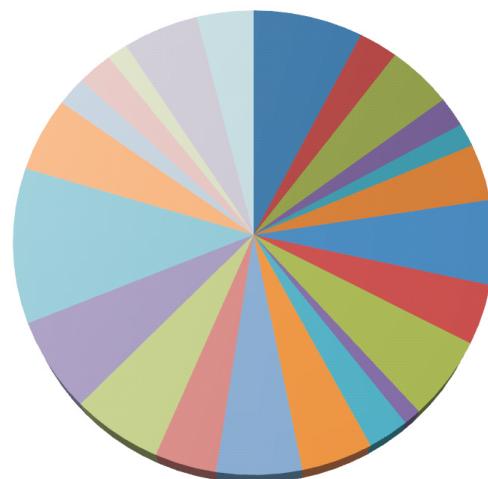


Figure 7: The Pie Chart Showing the Frequency of Occurrence of *they*

specific pronoun, it is male.

Serial numbers 10 and 21 are the lowest at 1%. These are ENG331 and ENG454. This seems to indicate that any assumption of the writer of ENG454 usage of such low number of male gender pronoun as probably based on gender sensitivity does not seem to hold water. It is obvious that the writer is just low in the use of pronominals of any kind generally. ENG331 is also apparently in the same class. But the difference here is that this is written by a man. This makes a whole world of difference. Apparently then, as the courses with appreciable level of the use of *they* are written by women, it would seem that gender neutrality is already being embraced by women writers of the NOUN course materials. However, when these same writers are put side by side with such high usage of the male gender pronoun *he*, one wonders what to think about this sort of contradictory situation (Daniel, 2008). Nonetheless, ENG411 writer appears to be more consistent in her usage of the *they* pronoun. This is consistent with the findings of Yusuf and Olateju (2005) that suggest that the gender neutral *they* is the sensible option to destroying the marginality that gender specific pronouns impose on people's linguistic choices. It will seem that this writer has learnt to embrace this sensible option.

Findings and Recommendations

All these suggest that there appear to still be some element

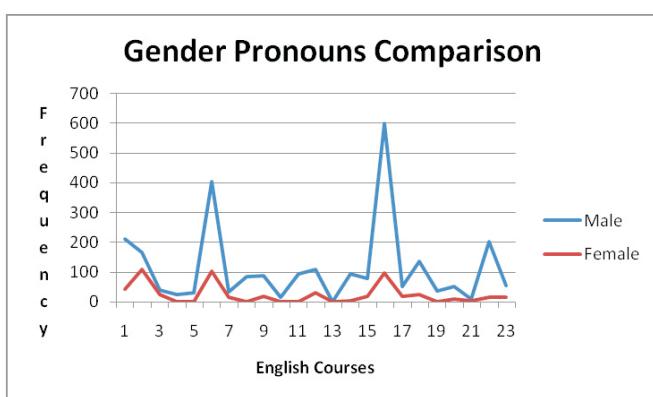


Figure 6. Comparison of the Female and Male Gender Frequency in NOUN Course Materials

of gender discrimination in the course materials writing language of the NOUN course materials. It is obvious that even the courses written by women only appear to make an attempt at seeming gender neutrality. One finds their inconsistent maintenance of a pattern disturbing. It will thus seem that NOUN needs to take a stand on this issue by requiring its writers to avoid sexist linguistic usages in the development of its course materials, no matter how insidious it appears. Considering that many of these course materials have to be contracted out to external writers, it is important that the University develops and enforces a categorical policy that will enable its writers to be aware that gender neutral language is important to it as it is focused on justly representing all its students without leaving anyone marginalised.

It will appear that this is frivolous if considered from the angle of 'mere' linguistic employments. However, if one considers the findings of Brown & Gilman (1972), Daniel (2008), Lakoff (1973), Spender (1985) and Taskaya (2013), one will find that language is not as simple as it appears. The insidious nature of the operations of such seeming innocent linguistic employment in downgrading the personality of womanhood has remained at the centre of the gender war (Taskaya, 2013). Okolo (1998) and Yusuf (2006) make clear the role of the English language in doing this. However, as scholars have shown, education could really help to advance the female cause without a social breakdown as many war torn countries around the globe show. Daniel (2000) has clearly argued for this position and it appears that it is still the sensible option. NOUN, as the only uni-modal ODL University in Nigeria, can really help to lead the way in the proper manner that women are represented in the education system. A politically biased structuring of its educational content can only suggest that women access to education is the least of its priority. One would thus encourage that the University seriously explores the suggestion of encouraging the use of gender neutral *they* as a way out; Spender (1985) actually notes that this was the case before sexism gained ground within the English language. It must nonetheless be said here that even though the NOUN training manual advises this (National Open University of Nigeria, 2009), not much of it is seen in the course materials analysed. A manner of making this

policy enforced should thus be vigorously pursued by those given the task of maintaining the instructional materials quality control in the university system.

This researcher has tried to make use of this in the editorial works done on course materials that came her way in the course of work in the English programme within the University. However one little effort may not make as much impact as required. The University needs to enforce its policy position for there to be a way forward in the social justice that gender inclusiveness suggests. Even if the training manual seems to suggest that there is such a position, not insisting on it by enforcing it in the writers' final submissions is as good as not having such a position. It is obvious that this is where the NOUN community will have to become proactive as it is those within the system, whose job it is to ensure gender neutrality in the NOUN course materials, are the ones that need to sit up and really do their job well. The question is: are they themselves gender sensitive? This is a question for another study.

One may thus suggest that the NOUN may consider adopting the strategy of African Virtual University by employing a gender expert to assess the gender responsiveness of their course writers before the final draft is submitted (Diallo, Thuo and Wright, 2013). If as Taskaya (2013) notes, educational contents should build self-confidence in the learner, women's self-confidence should be improved by the educational materials they read and not force on them the propagation of the stereotypical status quo.

Conclusion

This study set out to ascertain the political posturing of the NOUN English instructional materials in relation to women. It found that essentially, on every front, the NOUN English course materials are still sexist and non-gender sensitive. The few that appear to be moving towards gender sensitivity compromise their stand through also over representing the male at the expense of the female in the usage of the gender pronouns. The paper thus recommends that the University needs to take a stand by enforcing its gender sensitive policy by insisting that its writers be more gender friendly in their linguistic choices as well as avoid sexist language. The paper expects this to

allow for true justice within the University system as it becomes more inclusive in the kind of education it gives to Nigerians. It is therefore hoped that these findings will help the University community to become more gender sensitive in its linguistic choices as well as its dealings rather than assuming that gender sensitivity is not a major issue in the structuring of instructional materials; it is very much central to it (Taskaya, 2013). Nonetheless, it needs to be said that a further study of other course materials of the University in other programmes will help establish the actual state of affairs in the University concerning the issues raised in this paper to determine if what is found here is just a fluke. In addition, one would think that further studies of the educational content of the ODL institutions across the globe should help ascertain their level of gender sensitivity compliance, especially in these days of the encouragement of Open Education Resources (OER) support gaining global attention among ODL practitioners. If the contents of the ODL institutions are biased against women in terms of linguistic choices, the efforts at helping women get educated (Bukhsh, 2013) will end up being counter-productive as found to be the case with the revolution of Captain Ara Sharp in Stella Oyedepo's "The Rebellion of the Bumpy-chested" (Daniel, 2012).

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